

ALESSA

by
Alessa



Alice

by Alessa

I never expected it to end like this—seeking refuge in her arms, yet fighting to stay alive. She was a captivating abyss, both beautiful and terrifying. Even now, her presence stirs a mixture of unease and fascination within me.

The first time I saw her, I was drawn in by her allure—that delicate balance between light and darkness. My world warped into a dismal fantasy the longer she remained in it, making me question what I truly desired. Her comforting closeness blurred the lines, tempting me to give in to something beyond my understanding.

Was my attraction real or imagined? Had I accidentally fallen prey to her spell, or was I intentionally causing my own downfall? The appeal of the forbidden can distort one's will. I might blame my failure on her comforting closeness and the dream-like secrets that sparked my curiosity.

Life and death require both giving and taking. But now I wonder if love also follows a similar pattern between vulnerability and strength, surrender and conquest. Was love devotion or self-negation when faced with someone like her? The idea of embracing her darkness and losing my will seemed both terrifying and thrilling.

In the end, it is futile trying to decipher Alice's true nature. Her secrets remain veiled, and perhaps that was always her ultimate allure—embracing the eternal child, the unknown—stepping into the abyss with eyes wide open.



I suppose it began in the comfort of my own home. The process of transferring long-neglected and half-forgotten snapshots from my smartphone to the sleek expanse of my laptop screen is the safest form of time travel—you don't need a licence, or even a seat belt. These images were dormant for at least a year, and it was with a piece of chocolate éclair in one hand and a glass of Malbec within reach that I finally settled down in anticipation of whatever they might reveal.

Time swept past faster than me hitting the snooze button on a Monday morning. Forty minutes and two glasses of wine later, I was still wondering why the hell I'd taken five photographs of Alice's Shop. There was a certain justification, admittedly, for this dimly lit shop is where the famous 1872 *Through the Looking-Glass* episode takes place, which the real Alice would have frequented as a child, being her nearest sweetshop. Nevertheless, such a historical anecdote scarcely justified five identical snapshots on an overcast July afternoon.

The remainder of the photographs held no particular mystery, at least not to me. At the first glance, each photograph appeared innocuous—a bustling street in Bangkok, far enough from Patpong to be safe; a serene beach near Sydney; a verdant park nestled within Tokyo; the impoverished slum somewhere in Brasilia or perhaps Rio.

An extremely keen observer might have detected a recurrent motif in nearly all the pictures—a particularly beautiful little girl. She never occupies the central frame, yet always remains perfectly in focus. This cherubic enigma is not the same child across all photographs. Each little girl is different, with her own unique features. They all have different hair—black, golden blonde, or earthy brown; skin like alabaster; eyes of different hues and huge, like saucers. Petite and elfin in stature, they conveyed an air of delicate fragility. The little girl in the Tokyo snapshot is probably no older than ten, whereas the girl from Bangkok might have been twelve.

My attention remained fixated on the series of photographs of Alice's Shop captured from slightly varying angles, but all taken from the vantage point of St. Aldate's. The elongated shadows indicated the evening hours, probably just before sunset. And yet, in stark contrast, there was an absence of the little girl. Where the hell did she go?

I slept badly that night, but without waking up, as it often happens. My dreams were obscene and unsettling, reminiscent of adolescent fantasies from my teenage years. I'll spare you the details, except that a little girl was in them.

She appeared smaller than the ideal etched in my daydreams, with the creamy pallor of the Londoner who can't afford to buy a tan. Tresses of somewhat untidy blonde hair formed every hue from white-spun sun rays to shades of honeyed brown, uniting in a cascade of long, flowing locks. Her eyes were too dark—impossibly dark—and her smile remained long after the dream had ended. It was not the smile a little girl should have. It was the smile of something older, and wiser, and very hungry.

At daybreak, I woke shivering, expecting to find the sheets drenched with sweat. Instead, they were completely dry and cold, as though no one had slept there at all.



Brian is far and away the best attorney I've ever had. He's a UCL law graduate, efficient, intelligent, computer-literate, multilingual, empathic, diplomatic, moderately alcoholic, and not attractive enough to divert attention. We've been having breakfast today in a small French-style café near the court, where he was busy with his latest case. Two of the juniors, both avid prosecutors, were sitting at a table near the door discussing the latest batch of ripper murders that were splattered across all the papers. A pot of coffee and a cherry Danish were waiting for me in my booth, and so was Brian.

"Rough night?" he murmured as I sat down.

I grinned and shook my head. "Nah, just the late-night intelligence gathering. I'm still stuck on Le Carré's book you recommended to me. Thanks for complicating my life, by the way."

Brian chuckled. "Ah, the glamorous life of a secret agent. I bet you make those covert operations look like child's play," he teased.

"I try my best," I said, taking a sip of coffee. "So, speaking of mysteries, I need your help with something. Remember Charlotte, my ex?"

"Oh, how could I forget?" Brian raised an eyebrow tauntingly. "The one who had a talent for turning your life into a soap opera?"

"That's the one," I replied with a smirk. "Well, she's gone missing, and I want to find her."

Brian's playful demeanour shifted to concern. "Wow, that's serious. When did you last hear from her?"

"It's been weeks," I said, sighing. "I've tried calling, texting, and even reached out to her friends, but no one has seen or heard from her."

"I'm really sorry to hear that," Brian said sincerely. "We can definitely explore some legal avenues to help locate her. But before that, you mentioned on the phone a joint bank account agreement you had with her. What's the deal with that?"

"Yeah, so we opened a joint account a while back, you know, to manage shared expenses and all that lovey-dovey stuff." I rolled my eyes. "But now that she's vanished since we parted, I'm not sure what to do about it. Should I freeze the account or what?"

Brian nodded thoughtfully. "Well, freezing it might be a good idea for now until we figure out what happened to her. We don't want any unauthorised access to the funds in the meantime. Also, we should review the terms of the agreement to see what it says about the situation like this."

I pulled out a folder from my handbag and handed it over to him. "Here's a copy of the agreement. I've highlighted the important parts."

Brian skimmed through the document and smirked. "You really do think like an attorney, don't you?"

"You taught me well," I quipped.

He chuckled and continued, "Okay, so according to this, in the event of either party's absence or inability to manage the account, the other party shall have the authority to make decisions regarding the account."

"Sounds simple enough," I said. "But do you think it's okay to access her share of the funds without knowing what happened to her?"

Brian leaned back, looking thoughtful. "Ethically, it's a grey area, but legally, you do have the authority to act in her absence. If we find out she's in trouble or needs the funds for something important, we can always handle it accordingly later on. Besides, nobody expects you to be moral paragon in this rotten country. We've had too many kings and far too many princes; nobody gives a damn about ethics or

morals these days. As for your private life, all right, I know you can't give a lecture without seducing one of the students, but what does that matter? They're all girls, aren't they?" A smile played on his face.

I looked at him and said nothing. He knew me too well to bluff my way out of his insinuations. "Yes, they're all girls. And all over sixteen." I waved my fingers dismissively, then shut up as the waiter returned with my coffee.

Brian took another sip from his cup. "Alright, let's get the account frozen first, and then we can start digging into her disappearance. Maybe we can find some clues to her whereabouts."



I parked near the corner of the Thames and St. Aldate and stared at Alice's Shop like a detective on a coffee break, wondering what the hell was I doing that day and why the girl was missing from the snapshot. The urge to turn the Jag around and return to London was almost palpable.

Instead, I took a deep breath, unbuckled my seat belt, opened the door, and stepped out into the thin October sunshine. Having come this far, the least I could do was visit some bookshops. Besides, it was a week before Michaelmas term, and I could wander around the colleges again without hordes of undergraduates making me feel like a fossil.

It was past six and almost dark when I headed back to the car park, footsore from the uneven cobblestones, with fresh catalogues in my hand. There was a little girl standing outside Alice's Shop, staring into the window, though the shop had been closed for over an hour. She turned when she heard me, and our eyes locked. She had the same dark, all-consuming eyes from my dream that held me captive as we stared at each other across the street.

I knew, even before I saw her face, that it was the little girl from my dream. She was small, maybe nine or ten years old, wearing ripped jeans that showed her bare knees, beat-up sneakers, and a very baggy sweatshirt. Her hair, which might have been loosely curled or merely tangled, was that sugary-yellow colour of sunflowers and reached all the way to her lower back. She leaned back against the window, her right hand cupped before her, in what must have been a deliberate imitation of Dodgson's photograph of Alice Liddell as a beggar girl.

I stood there frozen for a moment like a rabbit caught in a snare, and then a tourist bus passed between us, blocking my view. Hastily, I turned and resumed walking south. A furtive glance over my shoulder revealed her absence. She was gone. I hurried along, not even wanting to wonder why.

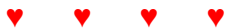
As I neared the car park, she appeared again, this time trailing five or six metres behind me like a shadow in my footsteps, maintaining proximity even as I approached the Jag. My fingers fumbled with the remote, and as I unlocked the door, I almost expected her to rush ahead of me and climb in. Instead, she disappeared while my back was turned, and I slid into the seat and locked myself in.

I sat there for a moment, breathing heavily, then turned the headlights on. She was standing right in front of the car, close enough that the lights illuminated the Oxford crest on her dirty sweatshirt but not her face.

A strange chill crept over me as she stood there, unmoving in the ghostly light. After a moment's hesitation, I reached across and unlocked the passenger side door, and waited.

I heard the door close softly again, and in an instant, she was on me—swift, skilled, and light as a fog in a graveyard.

I felt her bite... and the night fell.



The contents of my wallet were spread across the passenger seat when I opened my eyes again, but nothing seemed to be missing except the girl. I examined myself in the mirror. I looked bleary-eyed and slightly dishevelled, and maybe a little pale, but not injured. I peered at my watch—7:56. If I hurried, I could be back in London by nine.



I decided to work late on Thursday, finishing a paper for the British Journal of Psychology. My aim was twofold: not only to perfect the manuscript, but also to procure a plausible alibi in order to sidestep an impending meeting with Brian, thus avoiding any embarrassing questions.

On that particular evening, an unusual occurrence unfolded before me as I sat before my monitor. The precise words I required, as if guided by some enigmatic muse, effortlessly materialised as soon as I knew what I wanted to say. This marked a departure from the norm. Typically, when my fingers move across the keyboard, there seems to be a block between my head and my hands, causing every attempt at writing to clang and rasp like a worn-out typewriter fighting against obsolescence. Hours often slip by with me gazing out of the window instead of focusing myself on the glaring screen before me.

This night, I became so absorbed in my work that it was well after midnight when I looked at my watch and realised why my coffee was so cold and the street outside had become so quiet. Everyone else had been long asleep in their beds, while I found myself entrenched here in utter solitude. I cast my gaze once more towards the window, a shiver coursing through me at the sight of the weather, and instinctively reached for my coat and umbrella.

The air was cold, and the rain had ebbed to a fine drizzle, nearly a mist. The entire city seemed draped in sombre hues, feeling slimy and strange, as if exuding an eerie and unfamiliar dread. The streets stood abandoned, devoid of life, and the only discernible sounds were the muted growl of the Jaguar and

sporadic brief hisses as obscure figures emerged from the gloom, and I had to brake. The statue of Eros looked more like a vampire, and I thought I saw some shadows move beneath it as I passed—a huddle of junkies or a bag lady with a shopping trolley. Driving through London, protected by tinted glass and electronic locks, always feels wrong. Somehow, even in filthy weather, I just feel like a voyeur.

As soon as I arrived home, I closed all the curtains and turned on all the lights. Though it failed to entirely replicate the aura of home, the place at least emanated warmth and some semblance of security. I chose music from my phone at random, and the Sisters blasted through the speakers.

*Alice pressed against the wall
So she can see the door
In case the laughing strangers crawl and
Crush the petals on the floor*

For a psychologist, my sense of interior design left much to be desired. No exquisite antiques adorned the cabinets, nor did any Matisse grace the walls. I prefer to leave antiques outside when I can, and my taste in art runs more to Brian Partridge and Lucelle Raad. My private library clashes with the rest of the leather-bound decor, but my schedule rarely affords me the luxury of noticing such discrepancies.

Seeking respite, I sank into the comfort of the couch, reaching for my dog-eared copy of "Faeries." Amidst the macabre and the bizarre, the images of innocent little girls stood out—pure, untouched, and almost otherworldly. One particularly enchanting elf, with eyes like almonds shaded by the night, gazed back at me—

I dropped the book, which fell open to reveal a sketch of Leanan-Sidhe. "*On the Isle of Man,*" the text read, "*she is the blood-sucking vampire, and in Ireland the muse of poets. Those inspired by her live brilliant, though short, lives.*"

There was a knock on the door.

Rising from the couch, I looked through the peephole, confirming my fear. It was her, of course. She was still in the same dirty sweatshirt and tattered jeans. I drew a deep breath and then cautiously opened the door an inch. She smiled.

"Can I come in?"

She had a little girl's voice, a rather delicate soprano that carried an air of refinement. It was well-modulated, almost polished, like listening to a childlike Marilyn Monroe with a hint of an Oxford accent. Her words bore an touch of curiosity rather than arrogance or pleading, and her eyes were merely observant.

"Can I stop you?" I asked, only half-joking. The building was supposed to be impregnable. Even if she'd managed to sneak through the lobby while the doorkeeper was busy, a network of cameras kept an eye on every lift and corridor. "How did you get here?"

"By coach and bus. Your address was in your wallet."

"Why me?" I pressed on, determined not to give in easily, as I did in the Oxford car park.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" She tilted her head as if puzzled by my inhospitality.

"First, I need to know a few things."

"What things?" she smiled shyly.

"What's your name, to begin with?" I demanded.

"Alice, of course," she answered with authority, as if every little girl's name was Alice and she, the little tyrant, was the queen of Alices.

"What are you?"

She paused, smiling with her eyes as though she were trying to invent something. "What do I look like?" she asked, finally. "Aren't you going to let me in?"

"What will you do if I don't?"

"Go away," she replied, "and not come back."

I stood there, trying to convince myself that it was stupid to be scared of a little girl, barely half my height, no matter how dark her eyes were. I tried to imagine myself shutting the door and going on with my life.

And then I caught a glimpse of her bare knees again. I stepped back and let her in.

"What do you want?" I asked after she'd kicked off her dirty sneakers and folded herself up on the chaise lounge, her arms around her legs.

"Only what you are willing to provide," she replied, still looking around the room curiously.

"What would that be?"

"A place to stay during the day," she replied. "Some new clothes. An alibi, occasionally. And maybe you could drive me somewhere, sometimes. I don't know how long I'll want to stay—probably a couple of weeks, maybe a month. Your turn."

"Is that all?"

"What else are you offering?"

"What are *you* offering?"

Her eyes lit up suddenly. "There are lines." She said, suddenly serious. "You can cuddle me. You can dress me or undress me. You can give me a bath if you must. If you try anything else, I'll bite."

I calculated my options, but her eyes have already noticed the open book on the couch, and the rest of the library. "You've got a lot of books about little girls. How many?"

"I don't know... hundreds."

She laughed in that endearing, childlike way. "Why?"

"I like reading."

She nodded. "About little girls?"

"I'm a psychologist. It's for research into the history of girlhood," I lied.

"I could tell you all about little girls."

I sat down opposite her, and tried not to smile. "How old are you?"

"I don't really know. Eight, or nine, or ten."

"Then what possibly could you know about psychology?" I asked gently.

She looked at me impatiently. "For one thing, I know it's not the little girls you are researching."

"How would you know?"

"You want to know yourself, your own nature. Why you are who you are."

"Who am I?"

"I've known many like you. They say it's uncommon for women, but really, it's not." She squinted her eyes. "Don't look at me like that; you know what I'm talking about."

A chill ran through my spine, but on second thought, it was rather obvious. The way I looked at her, the way I sized her up, even admired her. It all screamed *pervert* to anyone paying even the remotest attention.

"Let's say you're right. Then, with your vast experience, you must be a hundred years old, at least."

She shook her head indignantly, blonde tresses flying about her every which way. I think she would have stamped her little foot if she'd been standing up.

"I'm nine years old, and I'll always be nine years old. That's what you want. That's why you like me.

I turned my back to her and walked to the window, only to realise I couldn't see her in the reflection of the glass.

"I know you," she repeated, "and I know things about you that you wouldn't even tell your diary, things that you can't bring yourself to mention. I can be here for you, and I've told you what I want in return. Do we have a deal?"

"How do you know it's what I want?"

She laughed. It wasn't a child's laugh this time, but the way one laughs at a child. "I saw you when you came to Oxford last summer—June, was it?"

"July."

"I saw you looking in Alice's Shop, and in Christ Church, saw you looking at little girls... And you saw me there, too. You took my photograph. You pretended you were just taking a picture of the shop. Have you printed that photo yet?"

"Yes."

"I wasn't in it, was I?"

"No."

She nodded. "People found that soon after photography was invented. I didn't know about it; photographs were new and strange then, almost magical, and very expensive. That's how some of them found out what I was. I'd never even seen myself in a looking-glass, and I didn't know that I never could; looking-glasses were for the rich. I can't even remember seeing myself naked before—"

"You're a vampire..." I whispered.

She laughed a little sadly. "*This must be the wood where things have no names,*" she quoted. "*I wonder what'll become of my name when I go in? I shouldn't like to lose it at all—because they'd have to give me another, and it would almost certainly be an ugly one.*" She looked in a mirror over the fireplace and said, "You can call me a vampire, if you like. I always think of vampires as male. We usually call ourselves sidhe, or nachzehrer, or succubi, or even lamia. But don't worry; I promise not to bite."

"You bit me in Oxford."

She pouted. "Not badly; I didn't take any more than I needed. You'll be okay. We do live off the living, often while they're asleep. They feel sick the next day, or depressed, but we don't leave any scars, and we try to give them time to recover. Nowadays, we mostly survive on suicides, and roadkill, and junkies who're going to die anyway. We leave before the ambulance arrives, and no one notices if the bodies are missing a pint or two of blood... Maybe that's why they say suicides become vampires. Of course they don't, or the world would be full of them. Us.

"Who are those *living* you talk about? Why would anyone sacrifice their life for someone like you?"

"They are the symbiotes who know what we are," she explained patiently. "Mostly artists or writers. They give us blood, and we give them dreams."



I slept badly that night. Knowing that there's a vampire in your guest room makes it difficult to relax, no matter how outwardly innocent or adorable she might appear. I was terrified of what my dreams might bring.

Why didn't I just throw her out, you ask? Maybe because I wasn't sure that I could bring myself to do it. It would be like throwing out what I loved the most—it would be like stomping on my own heart. I also had no idea how she might react if I tried. Besides, she'd known women like me for nearly two centuries, she claimed. Perhaps it was greedy and selfish of me, but I was curious and wanted to know everything. I needed to know what she knew.

My foray into buying clothes for little girls had been nonexistent until that point. Yet, telling anyone about Alice or revealing her presence in my home was not an option I entertained. Likewise, taking her shopping with me until she had something better than her Oxford rags was out of the question. I stopped at Uniqlo on the way home and bought a collection of garments that were roughly the right size.

True to her word, Alice allowed me to help her put on the new clothes. It was more awkward for me than her. When she was down to her undies, I felt like walking out and never coming back again. But I didn't. The allure of her standing before me half-undressed was stronger than any self-loathing I could find in myself.

We moved to the edge of the bed, and with a tentative touch, I guided her to sit up before slipping on a new sweatshirt over her head. The room was still and hushed, and the gentle whispers of fresh air tickled the curtains.

I reached for the new pair of socks. They were blue and pink with white bunnies, and as I guided her foot into the first one, my fingers brushed against her skin. How long have I waited for this singular moment? My whole life evolved around little girls, and a simple touch of her skin felt like a religious experience—an ethereal caress as an answer to my prayers.

Her skin, more cream than peaches, was perfect and flawless in every sense. Never had I seen such skin on a child before—not one scratch, not one blemish—ethereally sublime like marble sculpture, but soft and warm to the touch.

Alice watched me silently and with curious eyes, as if trying to read my mind. Did she understand my desire for her, or was I simply a convenient servant, someone who would gladly grant her requests as long as I could bask in her demonic presence? Even our reflection in the mirror showed me alone in the room—an illusion that mocked the depth of my connection with her, as if I were merely a fleeting shadow in her deadly existence. Yet, my fascination with her youth pulled me like a moth to a flame, beckoning me closer, oblivious to the undeniable irony of my attraction to a creature that thrived on blood and secrecy. The more I felt her flawless body under my fingertips, the more I questioned whether I was a willing participant or a mere pawn in her deceitful game.

The new clothes looked wrong on her after she put up with my awkward attempt at dressing her up. Some were too large and others too small, but she was a good enough actress to get away with it.

As a reward for keeping my side of the bargain and following her rules, she spent the night telling me about her first encounter with a woman like me, who had an unhealthy predisposition for girls of embarrassingly young age.

"I met Edith one early evening while strolling in the Royal Victoria Park in Bath. I saw her looking in my direction several times before approaching me and asking if I was lost. She was an artist, a painter, and an occasional poetess. Fairly attractive in appearance and still young, Edit turned out to be to my liking, and as it turned out, she loved me for simply being me—small and a perfect model for her erotic endeavours.

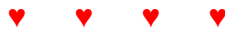
"Edith asked if she could write to my mother to get her permission so I could visit her on weekends and holidays. Arwen, my teacher, who was an older sidhe, took care of me in my younger days, so I told Edith she was my mother. It was easy enough to trick her into trusting me.

"Edith's Bath residency was full of books—and toys, of course, but I remember the books better. Arwen always kept me supplied with all kinds of books. She said knowledge is what will ultimately keep me alive. When Edith saw how fascinated I was, she gave me a few books to keep. I don't think it was meant as a bribe, though she always regarded Londoners as horribly commercial—she was a terrible snob.

"At first, all she would do was paint me in the nude. Later, she bought a second-hand camera and photographed me in her rooms, undressed and with various props for décor. Photography was still a new invention back then, but the child nude was already a favourite subject of Victorian artists. She even let me watch as she developed the plates. I hadn't really known what to expect, and I think she was too surprised to be frightened when she saw me absent from her photographs.

"Every time I visited her after that, she had more books on ghosts and things like that—*The Wonders of the Invisible World*, *The History of Apparitions*, *The Vampire*... Most of it was supernatural garbage. They were easily gulled in those days. Arthur Conan Doyle even believed in fairies...

"In due course, I allowed my guard to slip around her. I made a proposal, which she begrudgingly accepted. She needed a female child as a companion to spend nights at her place and whose mother wouldn't ask awkward questions. I, on the other hand, needed someone who would furnish me with lodging and all the essentials refused to small girls in that era. I'll spare you the sordid detail, but it turned out to be a beneficial symbiosis that lasted for a year and a half. Unfortunately for Edith, the peculiarity of our relationship and my own nature gradually revealed the fractures in her mind, until she was eventually incarcerated in the Bristol Lunatic Asylum, where she died shortly after."



Saturday was a typical London autumn day, bleak, and damp, and grey, though Alice warned me that we'd have to come home if the sun appeared. It wouldn't kill her as it often happens in the movies and books, or at least not as quickly, but a few hours worth would hurt and could crack her skin.

Driving down Gower Street, she glanced through the window at a bag lady, and sat up.

"You know her?" I asked.

"Yes. She's... she's one of us, but she doesn't know it. She doesn't even know she's dead, can't even remember being alive, and probably doesn't know why the sun hurts her. She just does her best to hide from it. She's likely been living on cats, rats, all sorts of garbage."

We turned into New Oxford Street, and I asked her to keep an eye out for a parking spot. "You said last night that you drank blood. Can it be animal blood?"

She shook her head. "No, it has to be human. I don't know why. None of us are scientists. But it has to be human, or you start losing your mind. Or your soul, maybe. You lose you, anyhow, you become stupid, you start thinking like an animal, hunting animals, and then you die. Arwen said that's how the stories about vampires turning into wolves and rats began—that, and the way we used to catch rabies from them and them from us. There's one!"

I jumped, then realised she meant a parking spot, not a vampire. "Thanks."



The weekend slipped away in a blink, and Monday morning dragged me reluctantly back to King's College, its unending faculty meetings, and complacent students. Still, amidst all this, my mind couldn't help being preoccupied with holding Alice in my arms the night before for the first time since she stepped into my life.

I never thought cuddling a little girl could be so frustrating. She was straddling me, cradling her face on my shoulder, and as much as I wanted to enjoy her slight weight in my arms, those succulent lips against my neck spoke murder if I dared so much as to shift my hands below her waist.

We maintained this Mexican standoff until nightfall, at which point I yielded to her superior firepower. Still, however bland the reality may have been, it exceeded the fantasies I had conjured in my fevered mind throughout my life.

Around noon, the ringing of the phone woke me up from daydreaming about Alice. It was Brian wanting to see me for lunch. I agreed and hung up, still attempting to regain that feeling of her soft skin against mine.

I slid into the booth across from Brian, who was already sipping his Château Palmer.

"Any leads on Charlie yet?" he asked.

I sighed. "Nothing concrete, unfortunately. I froze the bank account like you suggested, but there haven't been any unusual transactions. And none of her friends or family have heard from her either."

Brian nodded thoughtfully. "Hmm, this is concerning. Have you contacted the police yet?"

"Yeah, I filed a missing person report," I said. "But you know how it is with adults—they have to be missing for a while before they even get off their asses."

"That's true," Brian replied. "But we can still do some digging on our own. What about social media? Any activity there?"

I shook my head. "I've been checking all her accounts. No posts, likes, nothing since she disappeared."

"There has to be something," Brian mused. "People don't just vanish into thin air."

Well, apparently Charlotte did," I said snarkily. "If you have any other brilliant ideas, Sherlock, I'm all ears."

Brian chuckled. "All right, all right, no need to bite my head off. I know you're worried about her. Tell you what—let me call up a private investigator buddy of mine. He specialises in missing persons cases."

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "A private dick, eh? Look at you, Brian, right out of a noir thriller."

He laughed. "Hey, desperate times call for desperate measures. I'll have him look into Charlotte's digital footprint, phone records, security footage around her apartment, the whole nine yards."

"That would be great, thanks," I said appreciatively. "Who knows, maybe I'll even find her hanging out in Rio with a secret lover."

"Here's hoping it's something that benign," Brian replied. His expression turned serious again. "But even if she did take off on her own accord, it's not like her to cut everyone off for this long without a word."

I sighed. "You're right. This isn't like her at all. I just hope we find some answers soon."

Brian reached over and squeezed my arm reassuringly. "We'll figure it out. If anyone can get to the bottom of a mystery, it's you and me, kid."

I managed a small smile. "Yeah, what a crack detective duo we make, huh?"

Brian lifted his wine glass. "To solving the case of the missing Chaz. Let me know if any other leads come up."



Alice was asleep when I returned home or dead, maybe, but she looked asleep.

She was lying on the bed in the guest room, curled up into a foetal ball, still wearing her new jeans and hoodie from the night before, but no socks. Her eyes were closed, and her face had relaxed into innocent tranquillity, like a fragile porcelain doll resting on a bed of clouds. I stood in the doorway, watching her for a few minutes.

Outside, the rain pattered against the windows; the storm had begun in earnest. Inside, the faint glow of a night light on the mantelpiece, a dim tranquillity where the air is overladen with the warm, pale scents of childhood, of clean hair, of fragrant skin, soap and milk—the incenses of her sanctuary. And the moment I entered the night nursery, I could hear her transparent breathing. She had hardly hidden herself at all, not even pulled the covers around her small, unprotected form. She had fallen fast asleep in the middle of the bed, her eyelids sealed like traps, her long, blonde hair spilling like a baleful

spiderweb over the pillow. This little huntress, this little murderess, lay curled up with her thumb wedged, baby-like, in her mouth.

The wind yowled in the chimney, and rain reflected in the street lights. The curtains were not yet drawn, so I closed them for her. Weariness came over me. I wanted to touch her, but I loathed it at the same time, like destroying pristine snow with my footsteps.

I sank down in the basketwork chair by her bed. Her bare feet were so small, I could hold them both in the palm of my hand. How could someone so seemingly fragile survive for centuries? What were her secrets?

Alice stirred in her sleep and muttered indecipherably. Her fists clenched and unclenched. Her cheeks were delicately flushed a pale, luminous pink. Such skin—the finest texture of childhood, the incomparable down of skin that has never gone out in the sun. The more I watched beside her, the frailer she looked, the more transparent. I had never, in my life before, watched beside a sleeping child. The milky smell of innocence and sentiment suffused in my memory.

I had anticipated, I suppose, some gratified lust from watching her—if not the satisfaction of lust of the flesh, then that of lust of the spirit, of vanity; but the more I mimicked tenderness towards the sleeper, the more tender I became. How I loved her in that moment, yet abhorred the abomination she stirred in me.

Alice was not a peaceful sleeper. She quivered like a small butterfly floating on a summer breeze, and sometimes she moaned. While watching her in her sleep, I went so far as to stroke her eggshell cheek with my finger. Her skin was soft as plumage of snow and sensitive as that of a fairytale princess. When I touched her, she stirred. She shrugged away from my caress, muttering, and rolled over uneasily.

I decided to leave her alone and crept into the kitchen. I enjoy cooking, when I have the time, and I often pretend I make the best Alfredo sauce in England. Alice appeared some time later, wrinkling her little button nose, while I was chopping garlic.

"Sorry. Is this, ah..."

She shrugged. "Don't worry. It doesn't hurt me; it just messes up my sense of smell. How was your day?"

"Pretty awful. I spent most of it with a lawyer helping me pretend to look for my ex. How about you?"

"Nothing exciting. Can you drive me to Camden later?"

I nodded. She sat in the dining room and watched me cook and chatted about some of her former companions and lovers.

"Are they always women?" I dared to ask her.

"No, not always, but I prefer women. They are more reliable and less demanding. Men only want one thing, and it gets old pretty fast."

"Who did you spend the longest time with?"

"Emeline," she replied softly, her voice carrying a tinge of wistfulness. "We lived in Belgium for fifteen years, until the Second World War broke out. The chaos of war brought unexpected challenges. Emeline died there, shot by a stray bullet during the invasion. Even I almost didn't make it out alive. It was a time that caught us all off guard."

"Did you love her?"

The question hung in the air. There was a long silence, like the calm before a storm, heavy with unspoken emotions and unresolved memories.

"Love is a mortal concept," she finally spoke in a hushed voice. "If you can't stop from falling in love over centuries, you either go insane or kill yourself. Learning how to resist the pull of falling in love is essential for our survival. It takes too much from you. Love itself is a vampire, only it feeds on your emotions instead of blood."

"Then what gives you purpose? I wondered aloud, my voice tinged with fascination and concern. "Engaging with mortals in return for shelter, connecting with us to seek companionship until it lasts—I can't imagine such a life is easy or desirable."

A smile, enigmatic and alluring, painted her lips. "This right here is what keeps me going." Her dark eyes found mine, and they glowed. "Listening to you, watching you, getting to know you, and learning. Each interaction is a chance to gain new insights and witness the spectrum of human experiences. The ceaseless flow of knowledge and emotion is what fuels me. Even after centuries, I still find something new to learn every day from the people I interact with. It never stops, and it's inspiring."

"It's humbling," I admitted. "And I'm... I'm grateful you picked me out of everyone else."

An impish gleam sparkled in her eyes, a hint of mischief lingering beneath her small exterior. "Don't be too eager," she teased with a smirk. "I tend to bite."

"Now that you've mentioned it... May I look at your fangs?" I dared.

She burst out laughing. "Honestly, everyone else in your place would ask me to undress for them. But not you! You just want to look at my fangs. Are you sure you're a psychologist? You sound more like a dentist to me."

"I've always been curious about instruments of death. So... may I?"

"Of course. It's the least I can do for your hospitality," she said, tilting her head slightly as she obliged. She parted her ruby lips, revealing the sharp little fangs that protruded just slightly over her pearly white teeth. I leaned in closely, fascinated by their appearance. The tips were razor-sharp and translucent, tapering to fine points.

"Impressed?" She wrinkled her little nose. "They're not just instruments of death, as you put it. They're also a means of life for me. A paradox, isn't it?"

"It would be if you weren't already dead." It was my turn now to smirk at her.

"Touché," Alice scowled.

"They look sharp," I murmured. "May I touch one?"

She nodded, and I gently ran my finger over the surface of the fang. It was smooth and glassy, with a subtle curve perfect for puncturing flesh.

"Even your fangs look adorable." I smiled at her. "I can't believe you don't have a lisp with these things in your mouth."

She chuckled. "I don't think about them much anymore, but I imagine it's quite intriguing if you've never seen them up close before," she remarked, hiding her fangs and her playful smirk returning. "But I must say, your curiosity sets you apart. Most people would cower in fear at the mere sight of a vampire's teeth."

"Perhaps it's because I don't see the vampire. My interest lies in the little girl before me," I mused.

Alice raised an eyebrow, seemingly amused by my confession. "You're quite an enigma, you know that? You're obsessed with little girls to the point where you disregard your own feelings for them. But I suppose that's one of the reasons I find you intriguing as well."

"Is that why you loved Emeline?"

"She was a writer," Alice's voice trailed. "She tried to understand me from the writer's perspective at the time when I tried to understand myself. We were happy and carefree. Those were the good years."

"And how many were there after her?"

"Too many to remember," she reflected, considering the longevity of her experiences. "Like I said, you'd be surprised how many women of your predilection are inclined to offer a warm embrace to a small girl in need of shelter."

"I'm not sure if I should feel thrilled or embarrassed about it," I admitted with a wince, my cheeks warming at the thought of my current situation. "What about you, though? Is this a purely commercial transaction for you, or do you return the sentiment?"

Alice's lips curled into a wistful smile, her eyes glinting with a mixture of amusement and something deeper. "You already know what I think about love," she began, her tone carrying a touch of vulnerability. "That is not to say that once, when I was much younger, I didn't feel the need for it. It was my governess who introduced me to the pleasures of intimacy, and ever since, I've always been drawn to girls and women. This alone is the reason why I continue to pursue their companionship to this day."

"Tell me about your childhood," I asked, my curiosity piqued. "Where did you grow up? Who were your parents?"

"Now you finally sound more like a psychologist," Alice laughed quietly, as if collecting her thoughts. "I grew up in Oxford, where I was born. 1817 was the year—the same year in which Jane Austen died. My father was a don at Oxford University—Professor Edward Williams, renowned scholar of ancient

languages and antiquities. I was an only child, doted on by my parents. We lived in a grand house on the university grounds. My mother Clara was considered quite the beauty in her youth, though sadly her health was always frail.

"I was a precocious child, devouring books on any subject I could get my hands on in Father's extensive library. Languages came easily to me, and I could speak Latin and Greek by age eight. My governess, Miss Sophie, was hired when I was five to school me in etiquette, the arts, and feminine skills. Though my parents were loving, it was Sophie who I adored with a childish passion. It was she who would play with me in the nursery when we were alone. She was supposed to be teaching me about geography and manners, but her hands were busy underneath my dress and petticoat, her kisses raining on my lips as if we were long-lost lovers. I enjoyed those secret games with Sophie, but even then I felt a sense of urgency, as if I knew things couldn't last as they were.

"The day everything changed, I was out wandering the woods near our home, envisioning fairy realms in the mossy trees. Suddenly, a wild dog attacked, knocking me down and savaging my neck brutally. I lay bleeding in the mud, crying for my parents as I grew weaker. Then, out of nowhere, a young woman was kneeling over me, pressing her wrist to my mouth, urging me to drink. Her blood was strangely sweet, and I drank until everything went black.

"When I awoke, I was in a stately room of some grand mansion, with the same pale woman watching over me. She said her name was Arwen, and she had given me a gift—the gift of eternal life. I remember my throat burning with thirst, and when she handed me a jug, I drank the thick, warm liquid hungrily, though I did not know what it was. By then, I had become a vampire, frozen forever at my age.

Something in her eyes told me she was struggling to piece together the events in the right order, but I didn't say anything. Instead, I found myself listening with rapt attention, drawn into the narrative of her past.

"Arwen cared for me, teaching me what I needed to survive," she continued. "My parents had been told I was dead, killed by a beast in the woods. I could not go back to that mortal world and endanger them. I wept for them weeks afterwards, but eventually I forgot about my old life and felt exhilarated by my new abilities, the speed, and the heightened senses. Arwen became the mother I had lost.

"We travelled through Europe over the decades. Sometimes Arwen's companions would amuse themselves by teaching me about sensuality and seduction, though I was more of an oddity to them in my child's form. Arwen disapproved of this, but I think she was jealous more than anything else. She liked having me for herself. This is also the reason why she made me a vampire. She was very possessive of me, but also a good teacher. I was expected to read books and hone my skills when I wasn't in her bed.

"By 1910, we were in St. Petersburg, Russia. I met a beautiful young woman named Anastasia who worked in the Imperial Ballet. She thought I was a poor street urchin and took me in. At night, I would tell her fantastical stories from the past until she fell asleep exhausted, and then I would feed on her, giving her dreams that would inspire her for weeks and months. Soon she became my lover, too. She

was enchanted by my ageless child's body and the passion I learned from Arwen. We wouldn't leave her bedroom for days on end while snow storms raged outside our windows. It was bliss that couldn't last. When the Bolsheviks seized power, Anastasia disappeared in the ensuing chaos.

"Somehow, I made my way back to England, heartbroken, but by then I'd learned enough to survive on my own and without Arwen's help. My parents were long dead by then, and I had no family left. Then Emeline came into my life. It was between the two wars, and this time it was the Nazis who ended our happiness. Over the years I have taken other female lovers for companionship, comfort, shelter... but I'll always remember Emeline, and Anastasia."

I looked down at the skillet and realised that I was burning my dinner. I rescued it as best I could and asked, "Why didn't you make Emeline and Anastasia vampires?"

"I wanted to, but things played out differently—it was too late for Emeline, and Anastasia disappeared without a trace."

I nodded. There was something strange about the way she'd said *I wanted to*, but I was too apprehensive about questioning her any further. "Thank you for sharing your story with me."

"Care to tell me about your ex?" she asked out of nowhere. "Why did you part?"

I gulped. "Let's just say she didn't like my taste in books."

"Ah, so it was the case of casting pearls before swine," Alice remarked wisely. "Not everyone appreciates the charm of little girls."

"It was entirely my fault; I should've expected it." When she didn't reply, I asked, "What's happening in Camden?"

"You wouldn't like it."

"I wasn't expecting an invitation. Meeting with a vampire?" It was two days before Halloween, which the British don't celebrate the way they do across the pond, but which might be a Christmas for vampires.

"Yes."

"Going out for a bite?"

The little despot standing there in front of me with her murderous smile on her cherubic face, looked at me coldly and said, "Do you really want to know?"

One of the first things they teach psychologists is never to ask a question unless they already know the answer.

"No, I guess not."



That night, I dreamed about my childhood—something I hadn't done in years. It was my eleventh birthday, and everyone was there. It wasn't until I'd woken up, still feeling good, that I began wondering what was wrong with that. I'd had a tenth birthday party, yes, and I had gotten my first real camera then, and my parents were still together and all my grandparents were still alive, so why was I feeling like shit?

Alice was in the en-suite, brushing her teeth. I'd stopped wondering how she was getting in and out; she'd had centuries to study burglary.

"Is that what you meant when you said you give your victims dreams?"

"You're not one of my victims," she mumbled through the foam in her mouth.

"Are you sure?"

She spat the toothpaste out of her mouth. Her eyes were blazing, and there was white froth on her chin; she looked horribly rabid. "You're a psychologist. I'm a vampire. There is such a thing as professional courtesy."

"I'm serious."

She shrugged, stuck the toothbrush back in her mouth, and glanced at the mirror; I could see my reflection, but not hers. Eventually, she said, "I didn't give you that dream; you dreamed it by yourself. I just helped you remember it. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I lied, but she could tell.

"Don't lie to me. Nightmare?"

"No."

She smiled. "Okay. So I screwed up. Sorry; you looked happier than you had in years, and I thought—"

"Years?" I glared at her.

"I remember when you were a student. You went to Oxford University, right? Rooms on Logic Lane?"

I nodded. "Someone in admin must have had a twisted sense of humour... You mean you've been watching me for fifteen years?"

"No. Just while you were at Oxford. I liked you; hell, some might even say I fell in love with you. Your long hair, the way you moved like a blade of grass on a summer breeze. And I remembered your face, the way you looked at me, even back then. I pretended to play hopscotch on the sidewalk, where I knew you would walk by. I could see love and desire in you when you smiled at me, and when I saw you again..."

"Did you bite me then? When I was a student?"

She looked away from me. "Not seriously."



There was still nothing about Charlotte in my mailbox, and, as soon as the faculty meeting was finished, I called Brian; it'd be just like him not to tell me if he'd dug out some news about her. He wouldn't say anything, but wanted to meet with me anyway.

A moment later, I found myself outside, walking to *L'Artisan*.

"What's wrong?" Brian looked more serious this time, and I could tell he had been working diligently on the case, if the snifter of Martell XO in his hand was any indication.

"A lone mosquito wouldn't let me sleep last night." I sat across from him, reaching for my coffee and forcing myself to wake up. "Did you hear back from your private eye friend yet?" I asked in lieu of a greeting.

"I did indeed," Brian replied, sounding pleased with himself. "Got the call this morning, in fact. He was able to dig up some promising leads after following Charlotte's digital trail."

Oh, thank god," I breathed. "I was starting to lose hope of ever getting answers. What did he find out?"

"Well, he spoke to a few of her friends, and they all mentioned that she had been acting strange in the weeks leading up to her disappearance. Withdrawn, distant... it's as if she was going through something, but she didn't share it with anyone. "

"Really?" I furrowed my brow, trying to process this new information. "I had no idea she was going through something like that."

"It's possible that she was trying to deal with it on her own," Brian suggested. "But it's also possible that something happened to her that she didn't want anyone to know about. Anyway," he continued. "That's not all. Her phone records showed she sent some texts to an unknown number the night she disappeared. My guy traced it back to a prepaid burner phone, so no dice there. But he got access to street cam footage around Charlotte's neighbourhood."

I sat up eagerly. "What did the footage show?"

"Someone who might have been Charlotte had been seen in a bar on Cliff Road on Saturday night. She'd talked to, danced with, and accepted drinks from at least three men and one woman, but the barman hadn't noticed if she'd left with any of them."

"Interesting," I murmured. "Could one of these people be connected to her disappearance?"

"It seems possible," Brian replied. "Especially considering the bartender identified the woman as a regular customer who often chats up tipsy girls in the bar."

"Ugh, sounds sketchy as hell," I exhaled sharply. "Well, at least this gives us a solid starting point. Did your guy get the licence plate number?"

"He did. I have one of the men's names too. A real winner by the name of Derek Meyers with a rap sheet full of assaults, DUIs, and a drug possession charge. But the woman is a mystery. It seems no one can recall her name."

"What a mess," I said, deflated. "I assume the investigator's tracking this Meyers creep down, if nothing else?"

"As we speak," Brian downed the contents of his glass. "He should be getting back to me soon with an address. Then we can decide how to approach it."

"Yeah, staking out some ex-con's place sounds super fun," I snorted.

Brian laughed. "Hey, finding Charlotte is our top priority here. If a little recon is required, so be it."

I had to agree. "Let me know as soon as you get that address from the investigator."

"Will do. And Mike's offered to loan us some surveillance equipment too—hidden cameras, mics, the works."

Well, well, aren't you just a regular James Bond? Look at us being all covert and shit."

"Desperate times call for moderately unethical measures, right?" Brian joked.

"I appreciate you getting your PI pal involved. Feels good to finally have some solid leads." I said seriously.

"Of course, anytime. We're in this together," Brian said supportively. "Try not to stress too much. Hopefully we'll get the info we need soon."

"Yeah, hopefully," I echoed, though a pit of dread lingered in my stomach. Getting lost in London is easy—you don't even have to try—and I had no good reason to believe that Charlotte was still in London.



I was eleven years old again, looking through a viewfinder and waiting for the flash to recharge, and Iana was sitting on my bed reading, and someone touched my neck and shoulder—

I lay there, wide-eyed in the darkness, feeling as though I were trapped in a bed that was smaller than I was. My feet seemed incredibly far away, the ceiling much too close, and the red-lipped girl standing beside the bed was...

"You were dreaming again," Alice said. "I thought I'd better wake you."

I sat up slowly, vaguely remembering that I was thirty-two years old, single, and pitifully attracted to the small child standing before me. "Thanks... I think. What's the time?"

"About four."

I peered at her blearily and tried to focus; my night vision isn't what it used to be, but then again, it never was. "Where've you been—no, forget I asked. Was it a nightmare?"

"Don't you remember?"

"I—" I blinked and suddenly felt very cold. "I—no."

She stared at me, shook her head, and turned to walk out.

"No. Please." I rubbed my eyes. "Look, I won't be able to get back to sleep now. There must be other little girls like you. Why don't you tell me about them?"

She stopped, looked over her shoulder, said "No," and continued walking.

"Why not?"

"You're lying to me."

I sat there, numb, and watched her leave. Finally, I muttered, "I'm sorry."

A moment later, she reappeared in the doorway. "Tell me a story," she suggested.

"What?"

"You're obsessed with little girls—even more obsessed than you were when you were seventeen. Yet you would rather see them leave than bring yourself to act on your desire. Why?"

"What do you want me to tell you? Do you think I have the answers to any of this?" I despaired at her question.

"When Arwen made me immortal, I struggled with my condition too. It took me lifetimes to accept who I've become."

"Then you know what I'm talking about."

"How can I know when you haven't even tried to explain anything?"

I passed my fingers through my hair in despair. "It's the beauty of little girls I'm attracted to," I spoke quietly, trying to make her see. "The... the tenderness that underlines their existence, if you will. There is an aesthetic harmony that resonates within them," I sighed. I looked at Alice and saw exactly what I was trying to explain so hard, standing right there before my eyes.

"Is that all?" She pressed, and I closed my eyes in frustration.

"No, of course not, but—"

"But what?" Her fingers traced the collar of my blouse.

I shrank away from her. "Do I have to say it?" I glared at her. "I haven't had lifetimes to accept myself like you had. These are just my thoughts... my philosophy."

"Oh, so there is a philosophy?" She smirked.

"Yes, and you'll think I'm mad, but to me little girls are the perfection of beauty in nature," I continued, feeling suddenly embarrassed. "They stand as nature's masterpieces, an embodiment of innocence and grace, like living sculptures infused with love, curiosity, and joy. The way they move, the way they smile, the sparkle in their eyes—all are brushstrokes in a masterpiece. I admire them as some people admire works of art, but they are so much more than that; they are living, breathing universes with their stories, dreams, and complexities. Interacting with them is like connecting with a divine being, so why would I desire to possess them?"

Alice stared at me darkly and then nodded. It was nothing but the truth, though she must have guessed it wasn't the whole truth...

"Okay." She walked back to the bed and sat on it, folding her bare legs beneath her.

"There are other little girls like me, but the numbers are falling." She looked at the floor. "I'm talking single digits here. It's cruel to make immortal someone as young as me because it makes it infinitely harder to survive in this form than if I were twenty-years-old or older. Arwen made me one because she wasn't like you. She wanted me as her plaything. Perhaps I was an art object to her, but certainly not a divinity. Other little girls like me share similar stories. We're seen as freaks, the way people look at midgets in circuses. It's humiliating. Eventually, we lose the will to keep on going and decide to end it all. I'm not there yet, but the time will come."



They found Charlotte's purse in Regent's Canal near Camden Market that morning. It gave the police the clue they needed to identify the body they'd found between two of the half-empty office blocks on Sunday. The skull had been so shattered by the fall that even the dental records hadn't been enough. No one knew how she'd gotten up to the roof without setting off a dozen alarms. I had a sneaking suspicion, but I didn't think the coroner would believe me.

I rushed home at lunchtime and opened all the curtains in the house, except for the guest room. It was raining, of course, but I couldn't wait for the sun to reappear. Alice was asleep, or dead, and all her clothes were scattered over the floor. I searched her pockets, finding nothing, and suddenly she rolled over and looked up.

I opened my wallet, removed a photograph of Charlotte, and flipped it at her. She caught it neatly and flinched slightly.

"You do recognise her," I growled. "I'd hoped I was paranoid. Did you kill her?"

"What makes you—"

"I saw photographs of the body. There was hardly any blood at all. The coroner is trying to convince himself it was washed away by the rain. I've been trying not to wonder where you've been feeding, but now I have to know. Did you kill her?"

She shrank back, then shook her pretty head slowly. "Me? No. She was already dead."

"You found her in the alley?"

"No. There was a feast on the roof." She smiled bleakly. "I was the guest of honour—the new kid in town, so to speak. I didn't know she was your ex."

My knees buckled, and I pitched forward onto the bed, crying for the girl who'd left me and wasn't even serious about our relationship.

"Kaarina found her," Alice continued. "She's good at spotting suicides before they jump. I don't know the whole story; she hangs around the bars and waits until she sees a jumper, usually has a few drinks with them, listens for a while, tells them that she's thinking of suicide too, suggests they both go along together... Most of them chicken out. Sometimes they take her home, but she leaves before they find out what she is. Some of them... say yes."

I managed to lift my head and look at her. "For Christ's sake—" My voice cracked, and I tried again. "What sort of monster—"

"I'm a vampire," she replied. "You said so yourself. Or a sidhe. Or a nosferatu, maybe. I can't help what I am, what I need—"

"You can help what you do," I snarled. "You told me you can get the blood you need without killing anyone—"

"Sometimes. It's not always easy. Just look at me," she smirked. "Do you think I enjoy being a little kid for all eternity?"

I rested my head on my hands, wearily. "Easy? How easy do you think it is for me, loving little girls, but never touching them apart from the occasional pat on the head or a quick smile when passing by? It's not what you want, I'll forgive you that. We can't help what we want, even if it's wrong or obscene... but Jesus, what you do!"

We stayed there for what seemed like hours, me kneeling by her bed like a mourner, before she whispered, "What do you want?"

"I want the killing to stop."

"Is that all?"

I shrugged. Alice looked down at me, then reached out and touched my shoulder where it met my neck and whispered, "Who's Iana?"

"What?"

"When you dream, you call out for 'Iana'. You did when you were at Oxford, too. Who is she?"

I looked at her. My eyes hurt like hell from crying, something I hadn't done in years, and all I could see was the golden hair and dark eyes. I knew it wasn't Iana, but it might have been...

"Iana..." I began. "Iana was the first. The first girl I... She... She, uh, lived two houses away when I was a kid. Year younger than me. Beautiful girl, really beautiful... her mother died when she was, I don't know, seven or eight, I guess, and she lived alone with her father. He was a... I can't remember. Doesn't matter."

I took a deep breath and tried to start again. "She was the best friend I had and the only one who lived nearby. Her father wouldn't let anyone visit the house, but she used to sneak over to mine before he came home in the evening. Mostly, she liked to borrow books—he wouldn't buy any or give her any money—or just sit on my bed and read.

"When I turned eleven—she was nine and a half—I had a birthday party and invited her, but her father wouldn't let her go. We kept hoping that he'd change his mind, or come home late, or whatever, so she was sort of a guest of honour... but she didn't turn up. Anyway, my parents were splitting up, though I didn't know it then, and it was sort of my father's way of saying goodbye. He gave me a camera—a good one, a Nikon, with a zoom lens and flash... I'd used his camera before. I was better with it than he ever was...

"Iana came over the next afternoon. The rain was pouring down, I remember that... she was saying how sorry she was that she hadn't come to the party, and she hadn't been able to buy me a present. I showed her the camera, and she asked if I'd like to take some photographs of her. I took a few close-ups of her face, and then she started unbuttoning her blouse. She said it was okay; her father took photographs of her like that all the time...

"I can still remember what she looked like: blonde hair, like yours, big green eyes; she was a little shorter than me, and skinny, no breasts, little pink nipples...

"When I'd taken a few photographs, we..." I tried to talk, but there was a lump in my throat that I just couldn't swallow. Finally, I whispered, "did some of the other things she and her father did all the time..."

"It was more than twenty years ago; I was eleven, sex education was... well, my parents hadn't told me anything, and my teachers sure as shit hadn't. Besides, she kept saying it was okay, and I... I really liked her."

"Did your parents catch you?"

"No. I wish to hell they had. My father wasn't home yet, and my mother... I don't know. Iana dressed herself, and ran back home before her father got there. Of course, he knew what had happened, and when she told him that I'd taken photographs..."

"He had a gun—it was supposed to be for scaring off burglars—and he went into the bathroom and shot himself in the head. But not before he shot her. I don't think we heard anything; if we did, we probably thought it was thunder. The rest of the story didn't come out for another few days. When it did, my mother took my camera, ripped the film out, and burnt it. I don't remember what she did to me."



Alice was waiting as I emerged from the shower. She'd closed the curtains, and the darkness was almost comforting, like a confessional. I suspect I still looked like hell, but at least I felt human. Almost. I tied a robe around myself and collapsed onto the couch.

"You said she was the first," said Alice.

"Yeah. Well. I didn't have sex with anyone else until I'd nearly finished high school—my mother made sure of that. Just before graduation, a few of my friends and I drove down to a nightclub, but that was a disaster; she was older than me, with big floppy breasts and badly dyed hair, and... I didn't even try again until I got into Oxford.

"After that, it... became better. Easier. I met a few girls at Oxford who were still in their late teens... Brunettes were the best, and redheads. They didn't look as much like Iana, I didn't have to worry about using the wrong name, and eventually I got used to them, but it was never as good as..."

Alice nodded. "But you never made it out with any other little girls?"

"No, I'm not sure even if I would want to now."

"Then what do you want?" she repeated.

I thought about that and finally replied, "Nothing I can have. I want Iana to have survived. Even you can't do that."

"No," she said. "I can't. Is there anything else you want?"

I stared into the darkness. I could barely see Alice, just a pair of eyes and a hint of sharp teeth. "Innocence. If not mine, then... I want there never to be another Iana. I don't want any more little girls hurt."

And then it suddenly dawned on me. *Is there anything else you want?* "What are you suggesting?"

Alice tilted her head, her eyes glowing with an eerie intensity in the dim light. She regarded me thoughtfully before speaking. "I'm offering companionship, of a sort. If you let me feed from you willingly, I'll be all yours as long as you live."

I recoiled, shaking my head. "That's madness. You'd bleed me dry."

"I'm careful, and besides, it would be against my interest. Just a sip, now and then." She smiled, two little fangs glinting in the dark. "You know you want me. Let me be the lover you desire."

The proposition hung in the air, heavy with implications. The thought of sacrificing myself to this little girl in return for her love was unsettling. Her own explanation of love still haunted me: *'Love is a vampire, too, only it feeds on your emotions instead of blood.'*

Alice's smile faded, as if reading my thoughts. She leaned forward, her voice dropping to a whisper. "I can make it pleasurable, you know. My bite causes ecstasy. I can give you dreams in which you will always be with Iana. And when you're awake, I will be here for you. Love me or avoid me; the choice is yours."

I hesitated, feeling sick at the thought, yet intrigued despite myself. God knows I have always wished for a little girl like Alice in my life. But to be her food source... it was disturbing, unnatural. Yet so was my life now, since Iana.

"You don't have to decide yet. Just think about it." Alice murmured, her voice like a velvet whisper. "Imagine a chance to spend the rest of your life with the one you desire, and with dreams of the one you love."

I stood there, shaken. Was I truly considering her offer? What did it say about me that part of me wanted to say yes? I stared after her, unable to shake her words. A willing companion, one who would end my loneliness... it was tempting, so tempting. Was it madness to even consider?

I didn't know. But as I lay awake in the cold darkness, I realised my path had already been set. I was lost, adrift without Iana. If Alice could give me purpose again, make life bearable once more... what did I have to lose?

I looked at her; her dark eyes captivating and hypnotic. A myriad of emotions swirled within me—fear, fascination, longing.

And then I said, "Yes."

Sometime before dawn, I felt her curl up beside me, her touch a delicate brush against my skin. My arms drew her nearer, our fingers entwined, and our breaths joined in a single whisper in the night.

As the night faded into daylight, Alice's small body moved in my arms, tracing paths of passion I had never experienced before. The air was charged with craving, drawing me closer to her with each heartbeat. With every sigh and whispered breath, my hunger for her grew stronger, and as our desires intertwined, I felt the world around me fade into insignificance, replaced only by the intoxicating taste of her lips on mine and the electrifying sensation of her touch.

The morning light broke between the curtains, announcing the new day. And in that moment, I finally surrendered to the eternal child, accepting my fate with the dewy taste of her tongue and the sharp piercing of fangs at my neck.

But there was no pain, only euphoria, as Alice fulfilled her promise. I gave myself willingly to the dead, for a chance to feel alive again.

The End